

EDITORIAL

This publication was described by a writer in *Fortean Times* some time ago as being polemical. However, I disagree. In this respect it can hardly compete with *Saucer Smear*. And if you want something really polemical you should try Andy Roberts's occasional newsletter *The Armchair Ufologist*. Then, by comparison, you will see how genteel and refined the *Monthly Supplement* really is.

THE FUTURE OF UFOLOGY

In his editorial in the latest issue of *Magonia* (No. 69, December 1999) John Rimmer expresses some surprise that his prediction, made in 1969, that ufology would divide into separate areas of study, has apparently not been fulfilled, at least to the extent that almost all of those involved in the subject still refer to themselves as ufologists.

Most of us would trace the beginning of ufology - as distinct from UFO sighting reports - back to the summer of 1947 in the United States. At first, the reports of 'flying saucers' were generally attributed to misinterpretations of sightings of ordinary aircraft or natural phenomena. However, some people took the reports seriously, as they suspected that a few of them could be Soviet spy planes. In the early stages of the UFO controversy very few people believed that we were being visited by extraterrestrials.

The belief in the possibility of alien spacecraft, now usually known as the extraterrestrial hypothesis (ETH), developed during the 1950s. Unfortunately, the existence of this hypothesis made it very difficult to make objective investigations of puzzling observations made by reliable witnesses. Once the idea of alien spacecraft became popular, almost everything slightly unusual seen in the sky came to be recorded in the popular press as 'flying saucers'.

Believers in the ETH quickly took advantage of most people's ignorance of elementary science in order to boost the numbers of 'genuine' flying saucer reports. A favourite type of flying saucer was that which blazed across the sky and was seen by thousands. There was thus no doubt as to its reality. Of course these spectacular objects are known to astronomers as fireballs or bolides. They are merely exceptionally large meteors.

To turn a bolide into a flying saucer requires a special technique, which was quickly developed by ufologists. This can be summarised as a list of rules:

(1) Avoid consulting astronomers, amateur or professional, concerning a particular case. They might spoil it by giving details such as the direction and speed of the object, and even an estimate of the orbit it was following before hitting the Earth.

(2) Be sure to quote those witnesses who say that it passed over their houses at rooftop height.

(3) Look for witnesses who say that the object hovered for a time, or changed direction. One witness is enough. Be careful not to mention that hundreds of other witnesses failed to notice these strange manoeuvres.

(4) Assert that the object could not have been a meteor because of its flat trajectory and long duration.

(5) Critics who disagree with your findings should be labelled as 'sceptics', 'debunkers' or 'armchair ufologists'.

The above treatment of reports of bolides by ufologists can not only be found in the earliest writings on the subject, but it also continues to this day. It can be ascribed to ignorance or to intellectual dishonesty. The origins of this style of ufology can be traced back to Donald Keyhoe, who took full advantage of the fact that some senior US Air Force officers thought that the UFOs could be alien spacecraft.

Keyhoe's writings contain many genuine reports, but they are sensationalised and distorted, and interspersed with embarrassingly naive speculations about alien intelligence, in order to produce the desired effect. There are a number of UFO authors today who adopt the same approach, which can be very lucrative.

Keyhoe tried to achieve the appearance of respectability by dismissing the weirder reports, such as the stories told by contactees. The curious result of this was that ufology became divided into contactee cultists and 'nuts-and-bolts' ufologists who rejected contactee and close-encounter stories.

Those who considered themselves to have a scientific approach generally favoured reports with multiple witnesses. However, most such reports are easily explained as meteors or unusual atmospheric phenomena. Those who regarded radar-visual reports as the best UFO evidence often failed to realise that what was seen was not necessarily the same thing as the blip on the radar screen, and they tended to be ignorant of radar malfunctions and anomalous propagation.

Many people think that ufology got off to a good start with the Arnold sighting of 1947. Arnold is generally presented as a serious, sensible fellow who simply described his strange sighting without indulging in any fantasies about aliens. But those who have read his account of his investigation of the Maury Island case will get a different impression. In this account most of the ingredients that have made ufology so distasteful to scientists or serious scholars are already present, including the MIB and mysterious 'paranormal' incidents.

Any sensible person who reads the UFO literature or who follows ufological discussions on the Internet will be aware that very few ufologists have a sane, objective approach to the subject. Some of them apparently believe that alien abduction stories should be taken literally and they invent absurd hypotheses to get around the various absurdities which such a belief implies. Others consider themselves very scientific; they express scepticism about abduction accounts, but say that some UFO reports can be explained only as visits by alien spacecraft. However, they are extremely reluctant to have their favourite cases subjected to critical examination. Awkward questions about discrepancies and implausibilities in the reports are definitely not welcome. At the other extreme of ufology are those sceptics who constantly deride ufology and ufologists without bothering to learn anything about the subject.

Apart from the details, then, the picture has not changed all that much in over 50 years. So what of the future?

It is clear that ufology is set to continue for an indefinite period, not because of any scientific interest but because it has become firmly established as a form of popular entertainment. All but a few of the many books published on the subject are sensationalist or pseudoscientific. Although there have been books by sceptics, even these are usually marred by over-simplification of complex cases and the suppression of details which the authors cannot easily explain. One reason for this is possibly that a fiercely partisan approach, whether pro or anti, makes a livelier and more readable book than one which is scrupulously impartial.

Ufology now has an assured place on the bookshelves with other saleable subjects such as the 'paranormal', the lost continent of Atlantis, and the 'space aliens built the Pyramids' school of Egyptology. The very few serious UFO books which appear rapidly go out of print. Also ufology has become a staple of the TV pseudo-documentary and the chat show. UFO conferences attract large crowds, so long as their organisers take care not to invite sceptical or unbiased speakers (if any can be found).

Of course, there are some ufologists who carry out serious research and investigations, but even some of those seem to be a bit flaky at the edges. For most, though, ufology is simply for entertainment, socialising, or a form of role-playing fantasy gaming.

The interdisciplinary nature of UFO studies means that it is unlikely that any coherent and scientific approach to the subject can be successful. Ufology will long remain merely a playground for eccentrics and paranoids.

LITERARY CRITICISM

Kevin D. Randle. *Scientific Ufology*, Avon Books, New York, 1999. \$12.50

ETH proponents are notoriously reluctant to give lists of their favourite sightings, presumably because it enables the sceptics to concentrate their efforts on them and effectively debunk them. Now Kevin Randle risks their disapproval by discussing some UFO reports which he believes could possibly be

evidence for extraterrestrial visitors. He insists that UFO reports should be investigated in a logical and scientific manner, and that those that stand up to critical examination are deserving of further study.

But what type of UFO report is the most impressive and convincing? Randle writes: 'The key is obviously multiple-witness cases, especially those in which the witnesses are unknown to one another. After a week, or month, or, in the case of UFO research, years, we can rely on the memories of the witnesses if those memories are corroborated by other witnesses, physical evidence, and documentation.'

Unfortunately, there are very few of such cases, so it is interesting to see what Randle makes of those he has selected. He is inclined to forget that, in a multiple-witness case, it is necessary firmly to establish that there really were other witnesses, apart from the principal ones. In discussing the Trindade Isle case of 16 January 1958 he repeats the usual assertions by believers that there were up to 100 witnesses, yet he fails to produce any statements made by any of them and does not discuss reports that journalists who boarded the *Almirante Saldanha* failed to find these other witnesses.

The most puzzling case he deals with is the series of sightings around Levelland, Texas on the night of 2 November 1957. One of the problems for anyone studying these incidents is that there are several versions from different sources, and Randle does not tell us clearly which sources he has used and which ones he has rejected. His only acknowledgement of this problem is to note that: 'The first of the sightings reported directly to Levelland police was made by Pedro Saucido (or Saucedo, depending on the source), who, with Joe Salaz (or Palav, Palaz, Salav, or Salvaz, depending on the source), saw a glowing object sweep across the highway in front of his truck.'

This problem concerning the reliability and accuracy of reports is most conspicuous in Randle's description of an incident of 18 April 1962 in which a brilliant object was seen moving rapidly across the skies in Utah and Nevada. Randle collates the observations and suggests that the object changed direction near Reno, Nevada, from north-west to south-east. Project Blue Book concluded that the object was a bolide. However, if the reports of different directions are true, then perhaps there were two of them? An unlikely coincidence perhaps, but less so than something more exotic. Randle does not mention this possibility and seems too willing to give credence to individual witnesses. For example: 'It was also near Eureka that the object was reported to have landed near a power plant, shutting down part of the power grid. One witness, who wished to remain anonymous, told me that he had seen the oval-shaped, glowing object on the ground and watched as it lifted off, resuming its flight to the west.'

There is no mention of any attempt to confirm that there was a power failure at that particular time and place and no confirmation of the 'landing' by other witnesses, which would be essential if we are expected to take the report seriously. However, he does quote the opinion of a physicist who investigated the reports: 'Kadesch was not impressed with the descriptions of the object given by the witnesses, nor was he impressed with the fact that most had estimated it as being little more than a thousand feet high. He said it was difficult, if not impossible, for people to judge the size and distance of an object, especially if they didn't know what they were seeing. This is, of course, exactly right.'

Kevin Randle appears to have grown slightly more sceptical in recent years. Although this book is biased towards the ETH, this is explicitly admitted by the author.

Ron Halliday. *UFO Scotland*, B&W Publishing, Edinburgh, 1998. £7.99

The Livingston incident of 9 November 1979 is indeed a strange tale, but this book contains many Scottish reports which are even weirder. One is irresistibly reminded of the writings of John Keel. Although there are some multiple-witness reports, these are of the type that could easily be explained as sightings of meteors or aircraft. The more mysterious reports, as usual, are made by individuals or small family groups, with no corroboration by independent witnesses.

Nevertheless, there are some fascinating stories here, comparable with the best which have appeared in *Flying Saucer Review* and they don't necessarily involve sightings of UFOs. Take the pizza mystery, for instance. This tale is told by a man who was working in a pizza shop in Edinburgh in 1990. One night, two small adults of rather odd appearance came in, stood behind the counter, raised their hands and announced: 'Hi, we're Americans'. They apparently didn't know what pizzas were and didn't know anything about their ingredients. Eventually they ordered a pizza each and paid for them, then as they walked out of the shop they each took one bite and threw them into the bin outside.

A rather more complicated story concerns a UFO sighting by a family in Blairgowrie, which

was followed some time later by the appearance of a military helicopter hovering low over their house. The odd events continued. On one occasion two members of the family watched incredulously as a procession of 'strangely dressed males' walked up the street. They were 'all dressed in black Yiddish attire, wearing hats of the same colour and several with pigtailed stretching down their backs'. They walked up the path of a neighbour's house and disappeared inside. A little later they walked out again and back down the street. When the witnesses visited the neighbour to ask about them, she said she hadn't seen them; no one had entered her house. There were a number of other strange incidents.

A few years ago there was a lot of fuss about UFO activity in and around Bonnybridge. Halliday attributes much of this to media hype, encouraged by the activities of Billy Buchanan, assisted by Malcolm Robinson.

The author's speculations about the nature of the UFO phenomenon should perhaps not be taken too seriously, but this book gives a useful account of UFO reports and ufology in Scotland.

David Coomer. *The UFO Investigator's Guide*, Blandford, 1999. £8.99

As ufology is an interdisciplinary and somewhat ill-defined field of study, anyone who sets out to produce a text on how to investigate UFO reports faces a daunting task. Some UFO organisations have their own investigator's manuals and training courses and the author has attempted to produce a handbook for interested individuals who are fairly new to the subject.

Although there are snippets of useful or interesting information here and there, the general impression is one of a general lack of clear aims and a preoccupation with bizarre and incoherent theories about UFOs. For example, when investigating an alleged landing site you should carry out the 'time anomaly test'. Some ufologists believe that UFO propulsion systems distort space and time, basing their ideas on the theories of some mad professor. So you should synchronise some watches and bury them around the landing site, then dig them up and see if there are any differences.

If you actually encounter a landed UFO: 'Do not try to be a hero and attempt contact with any extraterrestrials you witness'. So don't say you weren't warned!

You will need to undertake some background research to make you an expert UFO investigator. Some sound advice is given, but one unexpected source of information suggested is the Freemasons - 'There are a lot of fingers in a lot of pies . . . ' Well, well. I didn't know they were into ufology. One lives and learns.

In a book on UFO investigation (as opposed to 'literary criticism') one might expect that the author would give some examples of his own investigations to show us how it should be done. But if he has actually investigated any reports himself he gives no indication of this.

If you seriously want to know how to investigate UFO reports, don't waste your money on this book but try to get a copy of Allan Hendry's *The UFO Handbook*.

PELICAN PRIDE

'And let's face it, no one knows what Arnold saw, it could have been many things. Even Arnold didn't believe it was alien craft.

'So, I'm a pelicanist and proud. I always wanted a label and now our colonial cousins have given me one. . . . But remember, pilgrims, owning a pelican can be a difficult choice, so think on - A pelican is for life, not just for Christmas!'

Andy Roberts, *The Armchair Ufologist*, No. 4

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